DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 852 CS 205 324

AUTHOR Freedman, Sarah Warshauer
TITLE College Students Reveal Their Learning Processes.
PUB DATE Dec 79
NOTE 13p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association (94th, San Francisco, CA, December 27-30, 1979). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills: Case Studies: College Students: *Composition (Literary): Educational Research: Grammar: Higher Education: *Learning Processes: *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process: Composition Research: *Teacher Student Conferences

ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to discover clues to the learning processes of college students by exploring a method for locating and analyzing student initiated concerns about writing in student/teacher writing conferences. Four tapes of teacher conferences with two students from the first and last of a semester were analyzed in depth. It was noted that the students seemed to have two major concerns that they repeated over and over again during the conference and that these concerns seemed to change as the semester progressed. During the first conference the student with stronger verbal ability issued more invitations to discuss strategy and the student with weaker verbal ability issued more invitations asking for information. The preliminary hypothesis was that students must have what they consider to be a comfortable level of control over linguistic conventions before they can begin to think about basic strategies. During the final conference of the semester, the pattern of seeking information or strategies reversed itself. The weaker student, approaching the level of the stronger student at the beginning of the semester, asked about strategies, and the stronger student asked for more advanced information about the finer points of style, showing a progression in the learning process. (MKM)

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"College Students Reveal Their Learning Processes"

Sarah Warshauer Freedman
English Department
San Francisco State University
1600 Holloway Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94132

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association

San Francisco
December 28, 1979

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"College Students Reveal Their Learning Processes"

First, I want to say that I am deeply honored to be speaking on this first panel on research dedicated to the memory of Mina Shaughnessy. Her work has enhanced not only my research but perhaps more importantly my ability to teach basic writing and to teach others to teach basic writing. The entire composition teaching staff at San Francisco State, I know, joins me in my feelings of gratitude to Mina Shaughnessy.

Almost a year ago, when I gave my speech title to Professor Gibson, I expected to talk about the composing process of college student writers. However, I changed my focus slightly during the past year, and so I am changing the title of my speech for today to reflect more accurately my topic: "College Students Reveal Their Learning Processes."

Unlike most composition researchers, I am biased in favor of well designed experimental research, not the casual experiment that unfortunately has plagued our field but an attempt at a careful application of the experimental method to test the validity of a model or to refine a model. Case studies have proved quite valuable in initial exploratory research in composition, but I believe that in order to generalize from small numbers of cases, we must move beyond the cases themselves to test the models of human behavior that such studies are capable of generating. What I am going to present today is my preliminary attempt to develop the kind of testable model that I am referring to--a model that will be derived from an in-depth study of a small number of cases. My aim is to find out how the cognitively mature adult learns to write better, to develop a model of the stages of growth of the adult learner.

Over the past several years, Flower and Hayes have been studying protocols

produced by competent adult writers while they are in the act of composing. Flower and Hayes have used these protocols to develop a model of the competent adult's composing process and now are testing that model against future protocols. In much the same way, I have decided to study protocols of adult writers as they are in the process of becoming better writers. I expect to use these protocols, as well as writing samples and other interview data, to develop a model of the stages of growth the adult learner passes through. This model of growth should generate hypotheses that will be experimentally testable.

My first major research problem was how to observe students learning. Students probably learn in many places, some of them closed to the investigator, like the student's private place of study, and some of them not very good places to view individuals in the process of learning, like the classroom. For example, one impressionable youngster, after coming home from school his first day, proclaimed that he was never going back. "What's the use of school," he said. "I can't read and I can't write and the teacher won't even let me talk." The one place that is both open to the investigator and a good place to observe students learning is the individual writing conference with a teacher about a paper. Since students and teachers can converse freely during the conference, I thought it could be a productive place to observe individuals learning. However, for one to observe learning in the conference, the conference must be carefully designed so that the student has the unrestrained opportunity to volunteer what she or he does and does not know, to voice his or her concerns about writing. On page 1 of your handout you will find some of the conference guidelines the one excellent teacher in this study used to open up the conference to student talk. Such intervention, in the interest of research, I believe, is pedagogically sound too, for Ellen Nold in a discussion of the well-structured conference warns against too much teacher talk. In the end, I found that my conferences seemed to yield protocols of learning just as the Flower

and Hayes writing sessions have yielded protocols of the composing process. In order to draw any definite conclusions from my protocols however, I will validate them with data I have collected from two other sources: student essays and student-investigator interviews.

My second major research problem was how to begin analyzing the transcripts of student-teacher conferences. I taped four conferences during the semester for each of 8 students who were enrolled in the freshman composition class of the same excellent teacher. The conferences were a natural part of the course of instruction. As I listened over and over to the tapes of the student-teacher conferences, I tried to figure out how best to analyze the learning process, how to identify specific markers of learning. I gave up Mozart symphonies on my car's tape deck in favor of the less dulcet tones of student-teacher talk. I drove my family to distraction with the constant invasion of non-musical tapes.

My first goal for analysis was to create a replicable way to get the most interesting information from the tapes. To create a system of analysis, I found it necessary to narrow my focus to only a few conferences. I chose to pay attention to four conferences: the first of the semester and the last of the semester for one of the weaker students in the class and for one of the stronger students in the class. Strength and weakness was measured by verbal aptitude scores. As I listened to these four tapes and poured over the transcripts, what seemed most salient to me in the four conferences was that in a given conference each student seemed to have one or two main concerns that s/he seemed to repeat over and over again and that concern or those concerns seemed to change as the semester progressed.

Interestingly, micro analyses of the discourse between psychiatrists and their patients have revealed a similar phenomenon. Patients repeat over and over again their main concern when talking to their pyschiatrist. In the book The First Five

Minutes, an entire volume on five minutes of dialogue between a patient and a psychiatrist, Pittenger and his colleagues found "a patient in a psychiatric interview will tell the therapist repeatedly what his troubles are. . . the very fact of recurrence--except of those patterns shaped by everybody in the culture--renders a pattern diagnostically significant" (p. 235). And Labov and Fanshel, in their book Therapeutic Discourse: Psychotherapy as Conversation, a book on 15 minutes of psychiatrist-patient talk, found recurrent themes too, which they labeled propositions and defined as "those general statements which are said to recur implicitly or explicitly in many parts of the session. These propositions provide the firm skeleton for the surface that confronts us" (p. 356).

It seemed particularly interesting to me that students in a writing conference repeat their concerns about writing to their teacher in much the same way that the patient repeats his or her personal concerns to the psychiatrist. Just as patients have very serious concerns, ones that matter so much that they repeat them over and over again to their psychiatrist, so that they are certain they will be heard; so do students have very serious concerns about their writing, ones that matter so much that they repeat them over and over to their teacher. Both the patient and the student want help with their problems.

My first step in formally analyzing the four conference transcripts was to locate every occurrence of every possible student initiated (that is not teacher prompted) concern. And the next step was to calculate the frequency of occurrence of each concern within each conference. The concept of student concern proved powerful. I found that in each conference, each student focused about 75% of his or her total concern on one or two issues. Other concerns were mentioned only once or twice and received generally well under 10% of the student's focus. And the nature of the concerns, as well as the needs of the students, changed from the first to the last conference. I must caution you that these are only preliminary findings based

on my analysis. Since one major goal for the analysis scheme is that it be replicable, I will next have independent coders identify the concerns in the tapes and finally will only report what can be corroborated. But for now, I will continue with my preliminary findings from my own formal analysis.

Jay, the stronger of the two students I studied, is concerned in his first conference with his blocked composing process. He has a great deal of difficulty getting started, getting ideas that he feels satisfied with. And unless he can get good enough ideas, ideas that according to his judgement are neither "vague" nor "redundant," he will not even hand in his work. In his first conference I found 76% of his mention of concern to focus on this network of categories having to do with his problems of getting started, problems which stem from his high standards for his work. He mentions five other concerns, all of them unrelated to this concern and unrelated to each other. Each takes up from 4 to 8% of his focus on concern.

In her first conference, Cee, the less verbally apt student, mentions 10 concerns, with 49% of the mention focusing on grammar and sentence errors, a concern quite unlike Jay's and one Shaughnessy shows typical of basic writers. Cee also exhibits a second substantial concern, her general distrust of teachers, focusing 21% of her mentions here. Her other 8 concerns get from 3 to 9% of her attention.

In the final conference of the semester the concerns of both students are different from what they were in the beginning. Jay never mentions problems getting started. He focuses most of his energy (73%) on discussions of the development of his ideas. Indeed, weak development in the product is a symptom of problems getting started and getting ideas during the process. So Jay could have just changed his way of talking about his problem. But Jay's concern is not with weak development; rather, he mentions over and over how much he worked on development in this essay and how satisfied he is with his development. It appears that during the course

of the semester he has learned how to overcome his main problem of getting started and getting good enough ideas.

In her final conference, Cee, too, focuses on development, with 65% of her concern placed here, but the substance of her concern with development is very unlike Jay's. She is dissatisfied with how her developed ideas and her thesis fit together. She is also still slightly concerned with her grammar and sentence structure, with 15% of her concern being placed here, but the focus on this concern has decreased drastically from her first conference.

I next felt that a more detailed analysis of the discourse involving student concerns could yield additional information about the nature of the students' apparently changing needs. So I continued to develop my analysis scheme. Jo Keroes, my co-investigator, in an earlier study of the discourse in two of the conference tapes found that the students frequently took control of the discourse during the conference. She found that when students took control, their speech acts met the appropriateness conditions of Searles's request. She labeled student requests as invitations and defined them as invitations to the teacher for help. She classified the invitations issued by the student to the teacher into several categories. When I started to look more closely at the speech acts students performed when expressing their concerns, I found that many expressions of concern took the form of invitations to the teacher. But I found that concerns also took the form of assertions. At times students merely asserted the existence of the concern without inviting the teacher to do anything. Frequently, such student assertions occurred in response to a teacher question--when the student did not have control of the discourse and when the student could voice the concern but could not invite the teacher to act upon it. In your handout on the back of the page you will find a detailed explanation of all of the discourse categories that student concerns fell into. I have only begun my finer analysis of how

students express their concerns. These discourse categories are preliminary and will certainly have to be refined, revised, probably expanded, and certainly verified by independent coders.

For now, to illustrate how such detailed analysis might prove useful in modeling the learning process, I will describe my findings about invitations expressing concerns and will compare them with Jo's earlier findings about invitations in general. In her finer analysis of the functions of different student invitations, Jo found that the functions of the invitations that students issued varied with ability level. In her analysis of the second conference for another weak and strong student, she found that the stronger student issued more invitations about strategy and the weaker student issued more invitations asking for information. My findings for the first conference for my weak and strong student were identical to hers. It appears that stronger students do not, at first, think that they need information to help them become better writers; rather they first need help with taking the information that they have and applying it in the context of writing a paper so that they can produce a better product. The weaker student, on the other hand, is not ready for help with basic strategies because she or he still feels the need for basic information--in these cases information about the linguistic conventions. My preliminary hypothesis is that students must have what they consider to be a comfortable level of control over the linguistic conventions before they can begin to think about basic strategies. The student wants to know <u>what</u> to do before worrying about <u>how</u> to do it. This finding parallels Shaughnessy's conclusion that weaker students need knowledge about the basics; without this knowledge such a student is not free to write.

But during the final conference of the semester, the pattern of seeking information and strategy reversed itself for the two students I studied. The weaker student, approaching the level of the stronger student at the beginning of the

semester, asks for strategies. Paradoxically, the stronger student asks for information. He has gained control over the basic strategies and has no need to ask about them. So now he returns to ask for more advanced information. He does not issue invitations about the basics; rather he wants to know about the finer points of style. He invites the teacher to discuss how sentence development relates to the development of ideas. It may be that at some later stage after he has integrated this information, he would again ask about strategies, but about advanced strategies for applying more advanced knowledge. If I validate that these concerns are in fact indicative of student learning, I could hypothesize that the growth process involves a cyclical need for knowledge, and then for a strategy to apply that knowledge to the written product if the writer does not already possess such a strategy, then for more knowledge and optionally for more strategies.

In conclusion, I offer no conclusions. I have explored one method for locating student initiated concerns and analyzing their linguistic functions in the student-teacher writing conference. Further, I have posited that these concerns seem to give clues about the learning process. This analysis is only a beginning that I hope will lead to a testable model of the learning process and to generalizations about that process, generalizations that in the end will help us all become more effective teachers of writing.

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HANDOUT 1

"Students Reveal Their Learning Processes" MLA

December, 1979

Sarah Warshauer Freedman
San Francisco State University

STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR CONFERENCE

Questions for Conference1

1. What about your writing do you want to work on in this course? Get the student to be as specific as s/he can.
2. Do you work? How many hours? How many units? Labs? Are there any problems you expect to have in this course that you think it would be helpful for me to know about ahead of time? Academic or personal problems count.
3. What do you think a good writer needs to know or be able to do in order to write well?
4. How do you feel about writing? Likes? Dislikes?
5. In the past, what kinds of writing have you done in school? Out of school?
6. Do you have time to do any reading outside of school? If so, what do you read? Get names of specific books and/or publications..
7. Who will read or who has read the papers you write or have written, once you have completed them? Friends? Family? If no one does, do you think it would be helpful for you to have someone else read? If someone does read your work, why do you have someone read your papers? What, if anything, do you get out of having them read?
8. Try to describe all the motions you go through when you write a paper (for class or other) -- from your first thoughts about your topic until it is completely finished. Probe for lots of details.
9. How long does it usually take you to write a paragraph (from the time you have the topic until you hand it in)? to write a 3-page essay? *If the student hasn't written before, ask how long he or she thinks such writing ought to take.*

Questions for Conferences 2 through 4

LEAD-IN AND TIME QUESTIONS

1. In general, how do you feel about this paper?
2. About how much time did you spend on it from beginning to end? Were you rushed when you wrote it, or did you feel you had enough time? If you had another 24 hours to devote to this paper, would you do anything else on it? If so, what?

PROCESS QUESTIONS Probe, but if previous answers indicate that this is a one-draft job, don't ask inappropriate questions; get on to other things.

1. Can you describe the process you went through in writing this paper?
2. When did you first decide on a topic? Did you think much about what you wanted to say before actually writing? How much time? Where did you do your thinking?
3. Did you make any notes ahead of time? What were they like? Did you write an outline of any kind, or did you just start writing?
4. Did you write the first draft all at one time or in several sittings? If several sittings, how long between each one?
5. Were there any times in the process of writing this paper when you felt "stuck" or frustrated?
6. Some people, when they write a paper, try to get down everything they want to say in as good a form as they can on their first draft. Others don't worry about making their first draft neat or perfect; they just try to get something out, and then they rewrite it. On this paper did you write either of these two ways, or did you write some other way?
7. When you were writing or revising, did you read your writing out loud or did you subvocalize? In other words, did you try to hear how your paper sounds?
8. Did you do anything different this time from what you usually do when you write a paper?

PRODUCT QUESTIONS

1. Is there anything about this paper that you particularly like or dislike?
2. Did you run into any problems with this paper that you haven't mentioned yet?
3. Do you think I'll like this paper? What do you think I'll like about it, and what do you think I might have some reservations about?

   (Be sure to get the student to discuss the quality of the sentences, organization, and development -- as s/he perceives it. Get him or her also to talk about both what is in the paper and what s/he avoided including because s/he feared errors or problems).
4. Did anything we have covered in class so far help you as you planned or wrote? Did any of it get in your way, make things more difficult for you?
5. Anything else you want to talk about concerning this paper, or the class so far, before we go on?
6. Before we go over your paper, can you summarize the main points you wanted to make in the paper?

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Discourse Analysis--Student Concerns

I. INVITATIONS (Requests or Questions)

A. Seek support: Designed to elicit positive response from teacher about the composition or some aspect of the process.

Example: "I don't know. I was just concerned that it wasn't going to come off. . . but I thought it was fun and. . .I liked it so I did it. But I was a little concerned that you might. . ."

B. Seek information: Designed to elicit information about particular writing concerns such as using punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and the like.

Example: "'by having, by having give--by having given, by having given' something is wrong there, 'by having given the most wonderful chocolate candy in the world.'"

C. Seek strategy: Designed to elicit strategies for correcting mechanical problems, for selecting materials for paragraph or essay development, for making the writing task in general easier and the like.

Example: "I felt like it took me far too much time for what I've got here."

II. ASSERTIONS--TYPE I (not in response to teacher questions, frequently student discoveries)

A. Give information about knowledge: Designed to inform teacher about knowledge about mechanics, topic sentences, and the like.

Example: T: "That's developing the point of fun gifts?"
S: "Uh Hum."
T: "Okay."
S: "Fun gifts because I didn't--on the thesis I didn't write that children would be excited or happy. I just put fun gifts can be useful as food decorations in cooking. Yeah, I didn't I'm being off the point of my thesis statement so I should take out all the candy up, all the, up to the package and put that as a separate paragraph and put happiness or excitement in my thesis statement and make it three paragraphs to develop."

B. Give information about strategy: Designed to inform teacher about how student will proceed or has proceeded during writing.

Example: T: "It's really a problem when you get a weak thesis, one that just doesn't allow you much room to grow."

S: "I think that if I don't feel comfortable with my thesis statement that I cannot really write a good essay. And my, with my alligator essay, you can imagine all sorts of things. . ."

C. Give information about attitudes: Designed to inform teacher about attitudes toward writing.

Example: "She's a good writer. She develops so well."

D. Assert to self. Refers to student asides, usually uttered softly while reading essay to teacher.

Example: "That should have been continued more."

III. ASSERTIONS--TYPE II (in response to teacher questions but concern is still student initiated in that the question does not demand particular answer)

A. Give information about knowledge: (aim same as II A)

Example: S: "I notice things more, the uh little things."
T: "What kinds of things do you notice more now?"
S: "Focus, first. Um, passives, when, when I should use the passive to keep the focus right"

B. Give information about strategy: (aim same as II B)

Example: T: "So how did you feel about the essay when you got done?"
S: "I liked it cause I tried to pay more attention to development except toward the end, you know, I didn't leave myself any time. . ."

C. Give information about attitudes: (aim same as II C)

Example: T: "Why don't you like others to read your work?" (paraphrase)
S: "I thought that they'd discover what I though about my work that it was too vague or something."

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